

Leadership as Service

An Interview with ISTE President Jan Van Dam



Jan Van Dam discusses the joys and challenges of volunteer leadership.

In every sector of our society, volunteers are being called upon to do more. In schools, for example, parents raise funds for equipment, supplies, and sometimes even teachers. They also step in to provide programs that schools feel they can no longer afford. In many ways, volunteers provide the skills, energy, and commitment necessary to keep systems and organizations going. In professional associations such as ISTE, volunteer leaders serve an even more critical function. They provide the vision and direction that keeps their associations connected to its members

and looking toward the future.

This is the final article of a three-part series based on interviews looking at various levels of educational technology leadership and leadership development at ISTE. The first interview with ISTE Deputy Chief Executive Officer Dr. Leslie Conery examined the need for educational technology leadership and looked at various ways ISTE fulfills this need. The second interview, with ISTE's Chief Executive Officer Dr. Don Knezek, examined ISTE's role as an

advocate for educational technology at the state and federal levels. In this article, Dr. Jan Van Dam, President of the ISTE Board of Directors, discusses the unique nature of volunteer leadership and how volunteer leaders have provided the vision and direction that keeps the organization moving forward.

Jan Van Dam has been an educator since 1970. She has taught middle and high school mathematics, computer science, and language arts. In addition, she has been a district technology director and worked at a regional educational service agency. In that capacity, Jan has spent time as a consultant, director, and most recently, assistant superintendent for career, media, and technology. She is currently working with 21st Century Learning. Jan has been deeply involved in many professional associations, most notably with ISTE by serving as a board member beginning in 1998 and as president beginning in 2003. She is also a board member of MACUL (Michigan Association of Computer Users in Learning).

Q&A

L&L: How do you personally define leadership?

Jan: I think leadership is listening, knowing, and understanding what needs to get done and then unleashing the power within every facet of an organization to make that happen. The best thing you can do as a leader is to enable.

By Chris Stephenson

Subject: Volunteerism, leadership, ISTE

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Leadership is about thinking bravely and boldly. It is about having a commitment to and understanding of what needs to happen and what needs to be in place for those things to happen. It is being willing to stick to it and not be swayed by momentary successes or momentary failures.

L&L: What is the relationship between ISTE's volunteer leadership, as situated in the board, and its corporate leadership?

Jan: We have a very interactive relationship at many levels, where the board feels comfortable working with and calling upon staff members to give guidance and assistance. Don, Leslie, and I talk almost weekly so that we catch up and ensure that we understand as a group the value placed on certain initiatives within the organization and how these initiatives are moving.

In June 2003, we completed a huge cultural shift with NECA and ISTE coming together as one organization under ISTE. We are now in the process of completing our strategic plan as the "new" ISTE. Although it is the board's responsibility to set the direction and move the organization forward, we have involved the ISTE staff to every extent we could through Don and Leslie's leadership. The feedback they have provided is being used to inform this plan. (*Editor's note:* Look for the strategic plan to be posted on the ISTE Web site October 1.)

L&L: How would you describe the relationship between ISTE's board and members? Do you see the board as primarily concerned with representing the broad interests of the membership, determining and pursuing specific strategic goals, or both?

Jan: We try to ensure that the ISTE board represents the important niche

groups in educational technology. The board is therefore structured to have at-large representation; specific representation, for example, from teacher educators, special interest groups, affiliate groups, and computer science groups; and committees that directly involve members in the work of the board.

Although I think it is extremely important for the board to have representation from a variety of areas of the educational community, I also feel strongly that when these folks come to the board and sit around the table and make decisions affecting the entire membership, they need to bring their point of view from their particular group, but they need to understand that what they do is for the benefit of all members. For example, I came to the board as the representative for the Special Interest Groups (SIGs). I felt I was there to represent the SIGs' point of view as best I could, but when it came to a vote, my job was to represent the SIGs but also to be a board member who represented all members. (*Editor's note:* Read more in Structure of the ISTE Board on p. 14 or at ISTE's Web site, <http://www.iste.org/membership/board/2004/>.)

L&L: Do you think the needs of your members have changed over the years, and if so, how has ISTE changed to meet those needs?

Jan: I think member needs have changed incredibly. In the early days, ISTE's strength grew from a meeting of the minds of people who came

together to study and learn from one another about technology. When I think of myself years ago as a teacher in the 1970s and 1980s trying to use technology, there was nowhere locally I could go other than my state organization of MACUL and ISTE. So I went to these professional organizations to learn from people who knew a lot more than I did about how to be a better classroom teacher and how to broaden my thinking about this field of educational technology. We then entered into a second phase of focusing on professional development and understanding research. This involved generating information and knowledge at the grass roots and disseminating that knowledge through professional development. Now, we are entering into a third domain about how we affect policy dealing with educational technology.

L&L: Over the past few years, it is clear that ISTE has begun to place increasing emphasis on political advocacy as a way of addressing serious issues in educational technology. Don Knezek noted that ISTE's board played a major role in identifying the need for this shift and outlining ways it could be achieved. What does the board see as driving this need for a greater level of advocacy?

Jan: Education in the United States has risen from a local issue to a state issue to a national issue. The No Child Left Behind legislation is truly indicative of the extent to which the federal government is designing what

education needs to look like. What this means is that I no longer go to the local school board or even my state department of education to try to get things changed. I have to go to the federal level. We have to play in the big leagues for our voices to be heard. You cannot sit back, you need to be an active participative citizen. We have seen that this is the only way that we can affect what is happening to every single classroom teacher.

L&L: Have there been bumpy parts along the road in the transition to a more advocacy-focused organization?

Jan: I joined ISTE in the mid 1980s and in my years in ISTE in many capacities, I don't see any of the things we have done as really bumpy. I see that we are growing up, and in growing up you have some growing pains. One of the very first things Don and Leslie do is reach out to other organizations who have been involved in these areas before ISTE who can provide valuable information and guidance on how to move forward. In the first few years, for example, we partnered with CoSN (Consortium for School Networking) to contract out our advocacy needs. This was like putting our toe in the water and seeing if it was the right place to be without wholly committing. Now, we know that we need to be advocates, so we have opened our Washington, D.C., office and hired a director of policy and advocacy who does the legislative and advocacy pieces for us. All of these changes are part of the growth process for us.

L&L: What do you see as the most pressing challenge for the field of educational technology today?

Jan: The No Child Left Behind legislation in the United States in particular requires scientifically based research that demonstrates that educational technology improves student performance. We therefore need to be

Structure of the ISTE Board

ISTE's Board of Directors manages the affairs and property of the organization. For example, the board approves the formation of Special Interest Groups (SIGs) and changes to member benefits.

Board members are volunteers elected by the ISTE membership. All current ISTE members are eligible to run for a position on the board. Non-members may not serve on the board. Board members serve two-year terms in 1 of 10 categories:

- PK–12 Schools: A school-based educator
- Computer Science: A PK–12 or postsecondary computer science instructor
- Teacher Education: A representative involved in teacher education at the postsecondary level
- State Technology Director: A director of technology for a state education agency
- International: A member from a country other than the United States
- SIG: A representative from one of ISTE's SIGs
- Affiliate: A representative of ISTE's Affiliates
- Corporate: A representative of the corporate members
- School District Administration: A district-level administrator
- At-Large: A representative involved in any area of educational technology

These categories ensure representation by ISTE's main types of members.

Elections are held each year for approximately half of the seats. No board member may serve more than two consecutive terms.

The board meets annually at NECC and schedules other meetings throughout the year. At NECC, the board members elect the officers, including the secretary, treasurer, and, in even years, president elect.

very active in collecting and serving as a clearinghouse for this research. If we are not, there will not be funding.

L&L: Do you believe there has been a shift in how we are looking at the role of technology in education, perhaps affected by policy and funding initiatives, and if so, how would you characterize that shift?

Jan: I definitely see a shift. In the beginning, educational technology was more focused on the science of technology. We began with learning about the technology. All of this is extremely important, but we also need to know how to use technology in every facet of education. We have moved from almost solely studying about technology, to studying about and with technology as an asset to increase student performance.

L&L: What do you see as the most pressing challenge for educators trying to effectively integrate educational technology into curricula?

Jan: Education systems worldwide have tremendous inertia, and creating an understanding of what educational technology can do for teaching and learning and using this understanding to bring about change is an unfathomable task for educators. Whether it is talking about how distance learning might change; how we structure a day, month, or year; or how virtual high schools can provide alternatives, the inertia is incredibly strong, and we are not breaking through it as quickly as I would hope.

L&L: Do you believe that the field of educational technology requires special qualities from its volunteer leaders?

Jan: Like any area within education, educational technology requires a solid understanding of the content and the issues, but the leadership aspect really revolves around a set of generic skills. Whether you are demonstrating leadership in an educational technology association, a literacy association, or a mathematics association, the leadership qualities look a lot alike. It is about thinking bravely and boldly. It is about having a commitment to and understanding of what needs to happen and what needs to be in place for those things to happen. It is being willing to stick to it and not be

swayed by momentary successes or momentary failures.

One of the most important things I have also learned from personal experience is that you need to know that you are never in it to get your own way. You are always in it to try to figure out what needs to be done for the benefit of the profession.

L&L: Do you see ISTE as fulfilling a role that is currently not being met for its members in terms of professional and leadership development?

Jan: ISTE recognizes through the work we have been doing in professional development, that there is a huge piece of work that has yet to be accomplished in the area of educational leadership and administrative development. We have begun to work with the administrative standards (National Educational Technology Standards for Administrators, or NETS•A) that were developed in partnership with other organizations. We recognize, however, that there is still an enormous need for more, and we are working to meet that need.

L&L: Although there is certainly a wide body of research and popular press relating to both corporate leadership and educational leadership, the essential role of the volunteer leader does not seem to be well understood or perceived to be particularly important, but the truth is, at so many levels, educational organizations of all kinds cannot exist without volunteers. How important are ISTE's volunteers to its effectiveness and long-term viability?

Jan: Volunteers are incredibly important to ISTE. ISTE's volunteer leadership in many ways has kept the organization moving. Volunteer leadership is not about running an organization. It is not about working hand-in-hand with staff on a day-to-day basis. It is about setting direction and making sure that the organization, through

your relationship with the CEO, moves forward in a direction that reflects what your membership community needs to have happen. It is about holding your fiduciary responsibilities sacrosanct. It is about making sure that you bring the right staff leaders into the organization, and then it is about letting those people do their jobs. Volunteer leaders provide the organization with vision and guidance.

L&L: Do you believe the board can and does play a role in developing future leaders for ISTE in specific and for educational technology in general?

Jan: I don't think we do nearly enough. There is tremendous work that needs to be done. I wish we had started 10 years earlier so we would have been ahead of the curve, but I think we can still bring in people and provide the support and the resources they need for professional development. Helping to grow future leaders is one of the big reasons we are becoming more involved in professional development for administrators.

L&L: Volunteer leadership usually involves a huge commitment of time without any financial recompense. What do you think is the greatest motivation driving volunteer leaders?

Jan: I think there are two or three things. I think many of us are driven to come together with like-minded people who can learn from one another. There are also career considerations that provide motivation, and I think this is a good thing. Being a volunteer leader provides professional growth. You build your leadership skills through consultation with others across sectors. This provides possibilities for expanding your network and building your own career.

L&L: Do you believe that volunteer leaders need to bring special skills or qualities to the task to be effective,

say as differentiated from someone in the private sector?

Jan: I think one of the most important things that all volunteer leaders need to understand is that we help guide through input but we do not get our way. As a superintendent, for example, you could ask a staff member to do something and it would get done. As a volunteer leader, however, you can say to another board member or a staff member "I think this is an important piece" and it may get done exactly the way you wish but it most likely doesn't. It becomes another piece of feedback that gets folded in with a lot of other information. So I think volunteer leaders need to understand that we are there to bring our expertise to the table and then to let the people who were hired do the work they were hired to do.

L&L: In terms of your personal development as a leader, what do you think has been the most difficult but also the most useful thing you have learned?

Jan: In the mid-1980s when I was involved in my doctoral work, I had a long discussion with my advisor. From that I came to understand that everyone acts logically in their own context, and so you need to acknowledge and appreciate this and to value contexts other than your own. Your job as a leader is then to broaden your context as well as to help others broaden theirs. This has been the largest aspect of personal growth for me.



Chris Stephenson is a doctoral student in the Teaching Leadership Program at Oregon State University's New School of Education. She is currently chair of the ISTE/ACM Computer Science & Information Technology Symposium and of the ACM K-12 Education Task Force. Chris has published numerous articles on computer science and educational technology and has co-authored several high school textbooks.